

# An act of folly which can only end in tears

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I AM fascinated by how we accept English expressions as obvious and are surprised that those of others are differently nonsensical. Take 'You are trying to pull the wool over my eyes'. In Russia they say 'You are trying to hang noodles from my ears'. With the latest instalment of the Midsummer Boulevard East Workshop organised by Milton Keynes Council and Central Milton Keynes Town Council, which Urban Eden is attending, I might be forgiven for thinking my eyes are blinded and my ears hung with noodles.

I previously wrote about last February's three meetings where 'solutions' appeared almost from nowhere. Suddenly we were told that 'we' wanted to fully pedestrianise Midsummer Boulevard East and knock down the north/south ramps to Secklow Gate bridge making it impassable to traffic. Er, no.

I attended the opening day of the latest round of talks and was pleased that the ramps will not now be removed thanks both to Urban Eden inputs and outrage but also because of the considerable technical challenges such removal would present.

Nevertheless I remain suspicious of the sleights of hand that are apparently under way. For instance we were told that the event had 'sponsors', all of whom had chipped in £3,000. That's funny, none of us are getting paid and the so-called 'technical team' (whose names in session one I still don't have despite asking in writing) are probably working for their own vested-interest companies.

So what role do these sponsors really play and how much influence do they wield? They are the council, CMK Town Council, Hermes Real Estate, Australian Super, Hammerson, intu and Milton Keynes Development Partnership.

While the 'technical team' has been revised and I have those names, I am still suspicious that the sponsors - with the possible exception of the town council - have compelling financial incentives to narrow, pedestrianise, extend shopping options and effectively turn Midsummer Boulevard East step by sneaky step into Bluewater shopping centre.

The plans we were presented with - ostensibly an output of our earlier deliberations - show the boulevard being narrowed on its northern face and thecentre:mk being proportionally extended, despite its Grade II listed status, by between six and 18 metres.

It is clear that the intention is that the south side retail offer would be joined to the north side by a series of 'rooms' - areas dedicated to certain activities across an effectively 'closed' boulevard.

These 'rooms' are named in the document as 'covered room', 'active room', 'market room', 'garden room' and 'culture room'. As part of the 'noodle hanging' exercise, we eager participants are being distracted by how each 'room' would be set up while ignoring the elephant in the room. How clever.

Where did these ludicrous 'Rooms of Activity and Experience' really come from? Who will maintain them and where would footfall come from in a largely under-populated town centre?

Is this doomed-to-fail exercise to distract participants while the real agenda achieves inevitability? And won't these 'rooms' compete directly, but fail due to cold and rain, with Middleton Hall, the Theatre, Gallery, Museum and Library?

And won't any attempt to turn Midsummer Boulevard East into Las Ramblas compete, but fail due to cold and rain, with thecen-

tre:mk's own excellent arcades? And when they inevitably fail, will the day of the further 'retail-infill' beckon?

I am also keen to learn what assessment of public opinion supports the assertion by the technical team that Midsummer Boulevard East is currently a 'poor place' and that the suggested options will transform it into a 'good place'? Surely simple maintenance will transform it?

When thecentre:mk was built, it was the first of its kind; a one million sq ft naturally-lit shopping arcade with free parking. It attracted coachloads of visitors from as far as Glasgow and Cardiff. As other regional shopping centres were built, it lost its uniqueness and its long-distance appeal.

Thankfully, it is still successful, as is intu:Milton Keynes next door. However, even without the upsurge in online, click and collect and other 'bricks and clicks' shopping hybrids, it can never be as it once was.

Expanding it exponentially to engulf our town centre is an act of folly which can only end in tears. If we do what we stupidly did at The Hub and narrow another boulevard, our children and theirs will condemn us. And rightly so.

Urban Eden entreats those with some disinterested influence to please wake up before it's too late. Thomas Heatherwick, the lauded designer of the Olympic cauldron and the astonishing new London double-decker buses, is quoted in the pack handed to workshop participants and I can do no better than to cite him here:

"My message for Milton Keynes is: hold your nerve. Don't throw away that original vision."

Cheerio.

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## I have the most rewarding job in the world

WHEN Emma Simm from Newport Pagnell went to Milton Keynes College in 2010 to study for a BTEC National Diploma, Children's Care, Learning and Development Level 3, she had every intention of working in a mainstream school. However, at the College she had an experience that completely changed her aspirations.

Emma worked with a small boy who is autistic. It was life-changing.

"I loved it so much and it was so rewarding that I knew this was what I wanted to do," she says. "Working with autistic children, they don't always make great leaps forward in their learning and understanding - most of the times it's little baby steps. But each step is such a challenge and achievement for them that it is incredibly worthwhile."

"In September one of the children I work with couldn't write his name. We've worked with him, one letter at a

time, so that he can now write it completely independently. For a mainstream child that would be very slow progress but for him it's a huge step and it feels brilliant to know that you've helped to make that happen."

"The child doesn't always appreciate what they've managed to do but when you see how proud and happy it makes their parents, it feels so worthwhile."

Emma works as a special educational needs teaching assistant at The Walnuts School. Aged 15, she had realised that sixth form and university were not the route she wanted to take. Instead she wanted to learn something specifically geared to helping her start a career.

"Going to the College was the best move I've ever made," she says. "The tutors were brilliant in recommending the right course to take and which placements to do. I learned about some quite technical stuff; specialist commu-

nications systems including sign language and picture exchange, where the child shows you what they are trying to say using visual prompts."

Emma is now looking to gain more specialist qualifications, with an eye on a university place. She is so committed to her job that she helps to provide respite care during her free time. "I do respite care as part of the Walnuts Care team. We take individual children out to activities such as Kingston Gym or the 360 Play Centre. It just gives the parents a couple of hours rest."

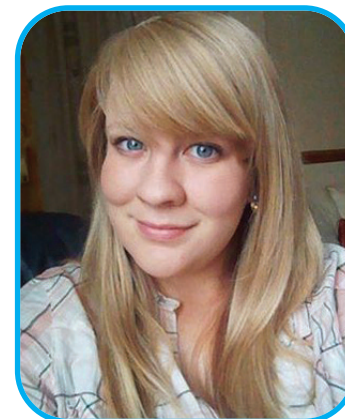
The work is not without its hazards, though. "A few weeks ago a six-year-old was frustrated, kicked out and caught me on the wrist. It fractured a bone and damaged the ligaments and I'm still having treatment for it now. The child wasn't trying to hurt me, they just don't understand their own strength."

Rewarding it may be but the job is also exhausting. "Sometimes I come home and I just want to collapse in my bed and sleep," she says.

Emma has words of advice for young people who, like she was, are uncertain about what to do with their future. "It's always worth going to speak to the people at the College to see the courses they can offer. Go and look round with an open mind. They might just have something you can study which will give you the right skills for the job you want."

"It certainly worked for me. I come home sometimes and I'm absolutely buzzing because a child has reached a particular goal and all I want to do is to get back to them to work towards the next milestone."

"To be honest, I never thought in a million years I would end up doing what I do now. But I really wouldn't change it for the world."



Emma Simm

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